

Marching to his own drummer

DHS grad Jackson Wetherbee makes his mark on the music scene

BY ANNE STEELE
CLIPPER INTERN

Two parts passion, one part dedication and one part drive are what seem to have turned a high school music student into a promising young artist, making his way through cafes and bars, fostering his talent into a career. Jackson Wetherbee, acoustic guitarist, singer and songwriter, has been honing his craft to likes of Dispatch, Jack Johnson and Jason Mraz.

Hailing from the South Shore, Wetherbee spent his high school years in Duxbury. He credits the exceptional music program at Duxbury High School with instilling in him a passion for music and a desire to follow a musical career path.

"I really found my true love for music at Duxbury," Wetherbee said. "I had a bunch of great teachers — they really inspired me to want to pursue it further."

A member of the Chamber Singers and the high school men's a capella group, PAC-Men, as well as the lead in musicals "Anything Goes," "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" and "Once on This Island," Wetherbee grew his talent by heavily involving himself in the music department's offerings and picking up guitar his sophomore year.

"In high school the bands that really got me playing were Dispatch and Jack Johnson and some of the older guys like Bill Withers," he said.

But he didn't stop there. All through high school, Wetherbee took weekly vocal lessons where he received classical training in Italian and German opera.



The Jackson Wetherbee Band under the hatch shell at EarthFest 2010.

"It's the best fundamental place to start because it teaches you to use correct breath support and how to sing so you're not going to damage yourself and how to take care of your vocals," Wetherbee said.

His vocal teacher pushed him to try out for college and he was accepted to Westfield State College for vocal performance. But two semesters in, Wetherbee received what would become a rather decisive call from Universal Music Group regarding an EP he had recorded with guitarist Dave Malekpour in the summer of 2007 before leaving for college. The next day, Wetherbee was driving to New York to meet with Jay-Z, then president of Def Jam Recordings, a record label owned by Universal, and L.A. Reid, then CEO of Island Def Jam Music Group. Wetherbee said they really liked his voice and offered him two deals. One was with Stolen Transmission, where Wetherbee would have \$10,000, a van and shows set up for a tour. The other option was to record a full band al-

bum.

"I chose to record the album because at the time I didn't have a whole lot of experience playing out and I didn't want my first shot to be not impressive," Wetherbee said. "I had only played a few gigs out of bars and one club gig and I didn't feel like I was good enough yet to really impress people."

Although Jay-Z stepped down from Def Jam before recording was complete and the deal was dropped, the self-titled album was released in August of last year under Wetherbee and Malekpour's Flying Carpet Records imprint. The 11-song set, recorded with the help of pianist Paul Wolstencroft (Slightly Stoopid), bass player Robyn Soper (Adam Ezra Group), and drummer Chris Santos, reflects his easy style and the band is described as full of "sincere and honest lyrical illustrations and effortless feel-good anthems."

This first album, along with the single "Weeping Willow," which was featured on the Give to the Gulf compilation

(all proceeds benefiting relief efforts in the Gulf of Mexico) are available on iTunes.

Since the release of his first album, Wetherbee has been wholly dedicated to making himself heard.

"I play as much as nine times per week. Sometimes I double up on Fridays — I'll play a cocktail hour and then a band gig and then on Saturdays I'll play another cocktail hour and band gig," he said. "I'm just working, making money, writing more music and just pushing the CD still and trying to record the next album."

As for a record label? For now, the band is sticking with a grassroots approach to promoting their music.

"There are people interested in hyping our CD," he said. "We're not really looking to get signed by any labels necessarily. That's kind of where the band is at now."

Last summer the band won Radio 92.9 Boston Battle of the Bands to open for EarthFest at the hatch shell.

"That was really cool,"

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Wetherbee makes his mark

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Wetherbee said of playing alongside the Gin Blossoms, Crash Kings, Collective Soul and Marcy Playground. "There were probably about 40,000 people out in the field when we played and supposedly 125-130,000 went through by the end of the day."

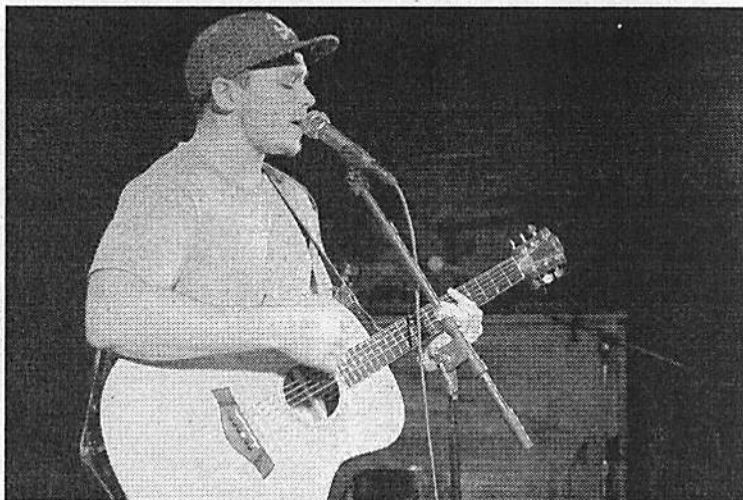
He said they sold CDs and worked the crowds to promote the band.

"I hired a bunch of our friends to walk around with our T-shirts on, which were bright green, with clipboards and basically got e-mail addresses from tons of people out in the crowd," he said.

Their success in Boston earned them the title "Ambassadors of Rock" for the East Coast and they came within 200 votes of opening for Bon Jovi at the London Calling Festival in London, ranking top two nationally and top ten internationally in the International Battle of the Bands.

Though EarthFest was Wetherbee's biggest gig yet, he said the band has been on a few tours up and down the East Coast in a 15-passenger bus. They've been down as far as Atlanta and New Orleans and back up to New York City. Wetherbee has also made solo acoustic trips to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Looking forward, Wetherbee, who writes all his own music, said he has about 32 new songs to choose from for the new album with Malekpour, Soper, Santos, featuring Jonathan Burman on saxophone, Dan Fowler on bass and George Smith on organ.



Wetherbee playing acoustic at Paradise Rock Club in Boston.

Wetherbee said he doesn't know when the album will be finished as summertime is their busiest season. Toward the fall they'll get into recording heavily each weekend.

He said his style is more developed since the first album.

"It's definitely evolved," he said. "I wrote most of the

songs from the first album in high school. I'd say this next album has a bigger reggae influence."

Wetherbee also said he has progressed as a writer.

"I think my writing style has become a little more fluid so if you listen to each song, you know what the song is about and you don't have to study as much as with the first album," he said.

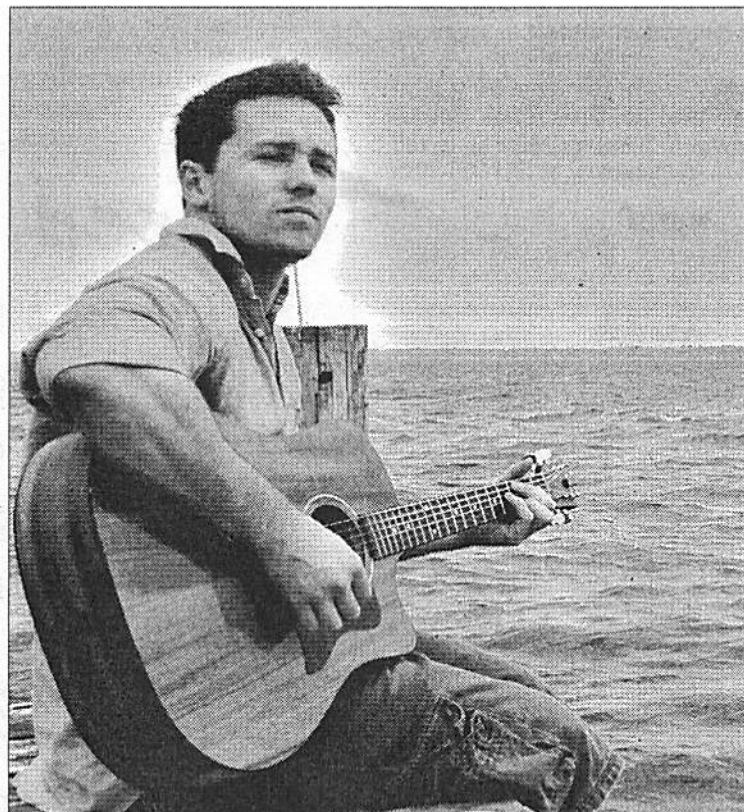
Wetherbee said their new songs have a reggae-soul acoustic feel.

"Not all the songs are reggae, but we have some soul tunes and a bunch more reggae tunes on this next album coming up, and some songs that are a little more in the Jack Johnson vein," he said, also comparing his new sound to that of Dave Matthews Band and Sublime.

"This new album has more energy I think — has much more grooving songs, and has a bit more of an edge, too. It's not so young and bubblegum," he said, adding, "My voice has grown a lot as well — it doesn't sound like a little boy singing anymore, I have a little more rasp to my voice — it's dropped more and I have better control over it."

Wetherbee said the band's following is growing everywhere they travel.

"Really it's people who hear me live and are really digging what my style is and want



Jackson Wetherbee found his love for music here on the South Shore.

Courtesy photos.

to come see me again – [they] will come sign up on my email list and buy a CD,” he said. “More and more often I have friends and myself who will be driving down the highway and we’ll see a ‘JWB’ sticker on the back of cars. It’s cool because it used to be you’d know it’d be one of your buddies, but now we’re starting to see a lot of people who we have no idea who they are driving around with stickers on the back of their cars.”

Wetherbee said they’re looking for an agency to start booking tours.

“It gets to a certain point where it’s really impossible to be doing all this stuff yourself and we’re starting to get to the level where we need to be getting on to some bigger bills and it’s hard when you’re just a kid with a band calling up these clubs asking to open up for national acts. 99.9 percent of the time, you’ll get shot down,” he said.

Nevertheless, amidst a thick lineup for the summer, in August the band will be featured at The Naukabout, the fourth annual music festival on Cape Cod. Wetherbee said he sees great prospects for the show.

“Not only is it a well-known and growing music festival, there’s a lot of music on the bill that really meshes well with us,” Wetherbee said. “All those guys are pretty earthy, real musician, real band-type people who really fit with us well.”

Wetherbee said it will be a great opportunity to expand the fan base.

“I think every band on that bill has a really good draw and people who are fans will become fans of the other bands as well,” he said, adding, “I’ve been getting random messages from fans of the others bands saying they had checked out the bill and are excited to see us play this summer.”

While Wetherbee is out living the dream of many a fledgling musician, he keeps his attitude as sincere and feel-good as his music and is optimistic about where he’s headed.

“I think our next step is going to be trying to hit other markets and really just growing our fan base.”

Check out Jackson Wetherbee at jacksonwetherbee.com.